

# Abyssinia's Samuel Johnson

ETHIOPIAN THOUGHT IN THE MAKING  
OF AN ENGLISH AUTHOR

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## { PREFACE }

One evening in 2002, I visited some Ethiopian friends at their Los Angeles apartment. We were to have a meal together in honor of an African journalists' association. I began chatting with Bekele, a man in his late fifties who had been an outspoken critic of several Ethiopian governments, with the prison sentences to prove it. The author of many antigovernment newspaper articles, Bekele was a widely acknowledged master of the barbed opacity that has been the signature of the best Ethiopian writing for centuries.

We talked for a while of politics, but he then asked what I was currently reading. I replied, "Samuel Johnson." Bekele gave me a puzzled look, and I was not surprised. He had been educated in the Ethiopian capital in the 1950s and 1960s, so I did not expect him to know the eighteenth-century English author—the redoubtable compiler of the one of the first dictionaries of the English language, the distinguished founder of modern literary criticism in English, the famous author of some of the eighteenth century's most important texts, and the object of perhaps the greatest biography ever written. But when I began to describe Johnson's vital place in English letters and mentioned his biographer James Boswell, Bekele's face lit up.

"Oh, I know him!" he said. "We read this man in school. He wrote a very good book about Ethiopia, *Rasselas*." I expressed surprise that he had read *Rasselas* (Johnson's fiction of an Ethiopian prince who left his confinement among the royal heirs to study how best to live happily) and astonishment that he should think a European author had written anything good about Ethiopia. But Bekele insisted it was true.

"This book," he explained to me with some satisfaction, "it is very Ethiopian."

I had opened my mouth to argue with him, to assert that *Rasselas* had little to do with Ethiopia and was a paradigmatic orientalist text, when I suddenly thought: What if there was something radical and important about the grammar of Bekele's statement? He did not say that Johnson was a great white writer who had managed, where other Europeans had failed, to capture the Ethiopian essence. He did not say that *Rasselas* was a good representation of Ethiopia. He said that *Rasselas* was Ethiopian.

In many ways, Bekele's comment represents a typically Ethiopian discursive move, reflecting the attitude of a cultural system that still believes itself the center of the universe, the home of the Garden of Eden, and the chosen people of God. All good things must be, by definition, Ethiopian. I had been aware of such beliefs before, as when, in a lengthy interview, the poet laureate Tsegaye Gebre Medhin

declared to me that Shakespeare was an African. I had felt some impatience then with claims that what Europe thought best about itself was actually African.

But Bekele did not say that the author Samuel Johnson was an African. He said that the text *Rasselas* was Ethiopian. I agree. It is my hope that this book will be a convincing proof—not only of Bekele’s specific claim but also of a larger claim about the importance of African thought to the European canon.

## { INTRODUCTION }

This book proposes a new model of transcultural intertextuality—one that illuminates how the Western literary canon is globally produced. This new model enables us to recognize how Europe’s others were not merely an ingredient of European representations, not merely the exploited subjects of the European gaze, but also the producers of discourse that has co-constituted European representations. My term for this comparative literature model of how thought from another tradition can appear in a text is *discursive possession*. To establish the model, this book concentrates on a dramatic case of unacknowledged African intertextual contributions: the role of African discourse in animating canonical eighteenth-century English fiction written by that most English of authors, Samuel Johnson. In making this argument, I am attempting to shift postcolonial literary studies beyond a focus on Europe’s reconstitution of other places and peoples—or those peoples’ resistance to that reconstitution—to add a perspective on the power of other peoples’ discourse to infuse European texts and to render European authors the objects of their subjects. Scholars can continue to focus only on African resistance and European appropriation, or we can turn to thinking about African possession of Europe, not *by* it.

This introduction delineates other models of transcultural contact and notes their limits. It then lays out a model of discursive possession and textual emergences, addresses possible challenges to the model, and provides two instructive examples of spirit possession from West and East Africa. Finally, it addresses the vexed terms “Africa,” “Europe,” “Ethiopia,” and the “Habesha” (the name of the people of the highlands of modern-day Ethiopia and Eritrea who are the focus of this book) and describes how the terms are used.

### Previous Models of Cultural Contact

In 1996, the scholar of African literature Simon Gikandi expressed puzzlement that more was not written about African agency vis-à-vis English agency, that is, about the impact of England’s others on England. In looking at the works of Aimé Césaire and Frantz Fanon, Tom Nairn and Raymond Williams, Stuart Hall and Terry Eagleton, Gikandi was surprised to see that narratives about England’s shaping of colonial identities were not paired with narratives about the colonies’ shaping of English identities. Although colonialism had structured every aspect of his own life, Gikandi noted, as a student even he had not seen how English culture and

literature were shaped by the colonial experience. Later, then, "I began to ponder on ways in which cultures produced on the margins of a dominant discourse might actually have the authority not only to subvert the dominant but also to transform its central notions."<sup>1</sup>

Sixteen years later, Gikandi's suggestion—that African agency is stronger in cultural encounters with Europeans than earlier critics had imagined—may seem in no need of defense or elaboration. Indeed, many scholars claim to be investigating the agency of Europe's others, and many have argued that Africans were not as penetrated by European colonialism as European fantasy would have it. Yet, very few have begun to argue that Africans and African thought actively changed Europeans and European literature in Europe.

Unfortunately, the five dominant models of encounter in postcolonial studies tend to preclude such a focus.<sup>2</sup> The earliest model of the cultural encounter between colonial and colonized subjects was, to coin a term, the static model, in which neither culture is changed by the encounter. European identity is fixed, untouched by its others. The next model was the annihilation model, in which one culture is understood as overwhelming and eradicating the other while remaining unaltered itself. From the 1950s through the 1980s, historians did vital work itemizing the destructive impact of Europeans on their others and the horrific costs of colonialism and the slave trade. In these histories, however, Europeans are consummate conquerors who powerfully changed those they met in their global travels while remaining unchanged themselves, always in charge, always agents of their own destinies.

The popularity of the annihilation model gave rise to its opposite, the resistance model of encounter, in which the colonized are understood as vigorously, and often violently, resisting colonial incursions (if ultimately unsuccessfully). In the 1980s and into the 1990s, such scholars asserted that earlier historians had problematically accepted the colonizers' representations of themselves as all-powerful and had therefore contributed to eliding indigenous agency. Resistance-model scholars recast colonized peoples as active participants in resisting their oppression. But, just as the annihilation model gave rise to the resistance model, so were resistance scholars chastised, in turn, for writing celebratory histories of autonomous indigenous action and underrepresenting the tremendous power of the colonizer. Scholars warned that viewing the other as either largely passive *or* vitally autonomous failed to represent intricate interactions adequately.

Partly as a response to these critiques, in the 1980s scholars proposed another model, what I call the appropriation model of encounter, in which one culture is

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<sup>1</sup> Simon Gikandi, *Maps of Englishness: Writing Identity in the Culture of Colonialism* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1996), xv.

<sup>2</sup> This section on models of encounter is a much truncated version of Wendy Laura Belcher, "Consuming Subjects: Theorizing New Models of Agency for Literary Criticism in African Studies," *Comparative Literature Studies* 46, no. 2 (Spring 2009): 213–232. For more detail on the eighteenth century, please turn to this article.

understood as appropriating aspects of others' cultures to construct the self and repress the other. In this poststructuralist model, agency is always in the hands of the appropriator, most infamously when appropriating the cultural expressions of the other's resistance. One of the first articulations of the appropriation model, and still its most known, is Edward Said's *Orientalism*.<sup>3</sup> Said detailed the process by which the English and the French began in the late eighteenth century to appropriate the Middle East in order to construct national identities for themselves of rationality, control, and fairness and thereby justify colonization as the rightful dominance of a superior culture. The appropriation model differs from the annihilation model in imagining that Europeans did not merely conquer their others, they incorporated them. Again, however, the agency of the other is elided. For instance, Africans do not shape English identities in this model; the English are understood as shaping themselves in particular ways in response to their encounters with Africans. Africans were exploited in the making of English identity but did not themselves make it.

Scholars concerned about the elision of colonized subjects' agency then added nuance to the model in the 1990s and 2000s. They shifted the focus of the appropriation model, which had been on how Europeans appropriated indigenous cultures, to how the other appropriated European identities, a reverse appropriation model. After all, in former English colonies, one finds that Christ, bathing, bowlers, and tea are not very English at all but have been thoroughly co-opted. Mary Louise Pratt, in her seminal work *Imperial Eyes*, called this type of reverse appropriation "transculturation," meaning "how subordinated or marginal groups select and invent from materials transmitted to them by a dominant or metropolitan culture."<sup>4</sup> In African history, an excellent example of the contributions of the reverse appropriation model is David Northrup's *Africa's Discovery of Europe 1450–1850*, which details four centuries of African adaptation of European ideas and products.<sup>5</sup> In one of the early works on the topic, Homi Bhabha named reverse appropriation "mimicry" and usefully complicated the models of annihilation and resistance by going beyond polarities of east and west, us and them, to describe the ambivalence and slippage that characterize all domination.<sup>6</sup> Michael Taussig also discussed the intertwined relationship of mimesis and alterity in cultural encounter, arguing that indigenous peoples in the Americas defended themselves by imitating what they perceived to be the nefarious attributes of their European adversaries.<sup>7</sup> Both sides

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<sup>3</sup> Edward Said, *Orientalism* (New York: Pantheon, 1978).

<sup>4</sup> Mary Louise Pratt, *Imperial Eyes: Travel Writing and Transculturation* (London: Routledge, 1992).

<sup>5</sup> David Northrup, *Africa's Discovery of Europe, 1450–1850* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), xi.

<sup>6</sup> Homi K. Bhabha, *The Location of Culture* (London: Routledge, 1994).

<sup>7</sup> Michael T. Taussig, *Shamanism, Colonialism, and the Wild Man: A Study in Terror and Healing* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1991); Michael T. Taussig, *Mimesis and Alterity: A Particular History of the Senses* (New York: Routledge, 1993).

of the cultural encounter created selves by appropriating what they perceived to belong to the other.

The value of these previous models—static, annihilation, resistance, appropriation, and reverse appropriation—is immense, and any new model must be built on their solid foundation. The problem is that all five of these models share a common weakness regarding European agency. Europeans (1) remain the same while changing others (static and annihilation model), or (2) remain the same while others resist them or imitate them (resistance and reverse appropriation model), or (3) change themselves in response to others (appropriation model). Europeans are never passive, they are never being changed. They are never unwillingly or unknowingly changed. Yet, unknowing change is the norm. An English person who uses words that came into English because of Britain's colonial activities—for instance, the South Asian words “bandanna,” “bazaar,” or “bungalow,” or the West African words “cola,” “gorilla,” or “palaver”—is not making a conscious choice, is not deliberately appropriating foreign discourse. In most cases, he or she does not think about the words' origin or even assumes these words are originally English. Where is the model of this agency-less change? The Achilles' heel of the appropriation model is that it does not differentiate autonomous from nonautonomous action.

An example of the problem of assuming conscious European agency is the research on the European incorporation of foreign agricultural products. Take, for instance, coffee. The indigenous agricultural techniques and knowledge of the highland Ethiopians who developed coffee are not understood as changing European identity and tastes; Europeans are understood as changing themselves in response to their delocalizing encounter with an inanimate object, the coffee bean.<sup>8</sup> The coffee bean is not understood as a social construction, the result of ten thousand years of human cultural decisions in Africa where the coffee plant was cultivated.<sup>9</sup> Rather, the focus is on how non-European ideas are appropriated by Europeans, not on how African indigenous knowledge has long shaped daily lives in forms as ordinary as the latte. Many books trace European “influences” and “impact” on indigenous peoples, or indigenous peoples' resistance to such, but few trace the influence or impact of indigenous peoples on Europe. Even those who claim to be doing so, are rarely actually doing so.<sup>10</sup>

<sup>8</sup> Brian William Cowan, *The Social Life of Coffee: The Emergence of the British Coffehouse* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2005).

<sup>9</sup> Steven A. Brandt, “New Perspectives on the Origin of Food Production in Ethiopia,” in *From Hunters to Farmers: The Causes and Consequences of Food Production in Africa*, ed. John Desmond Clark and Steven A. Brandt (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1984), 173–190; Elisabeth Anne Hildebrand, “Comment: Rethinking the Origins of Agriculture: The Utility of Ethnobiology in Agricultural Origins Research: Examples from Southwest Ethiopia,” *Current Anthropology* 50, no. 5 (October 2009): 693–697.

<sup>10</sup> As just one instance of many, James Axtell states in his introduction that he is examining how the English and the French had an “education at the hands of their Indian neighbors” (ix) but argues in his conclusion that “on any frontier, acculturation is normally a two-way process... but in colonial North America... [it] was decidedly unilinear” and “any changes in colonial religion were minor and self-generated, and not due to native pressure”; James Axtell, *The Invasion Within: The Contest of Cultures in Colonial North America* (New York: Oxford



One of the books on agriculture that does trace indigenous impact is Judith Carney's *Black Rice: The African Origins of Rice Cultivation in the Americas*.<sup>11</sup> Carney's research shows that Europeans did not introduce rice into either Africa or the Americas, but that the extremely profitable rice plantations in South Carolina resulted from the millennia of agricultural knowledge and cultivation skills first developed in West Africa. African indigenous knowledge then inspired certain patterns of the slave trade, in that slaves from rice-growing areas were particularly sought by traders and buyers. As her title suggests, Carney focuses on the agency of Africans in shaping the Americas. Yet her vital work has been attacked for having too strong a focus on African agency, with at least one reviewer arguing that she should have attended more to "European influence."<sup>12</sup> Somehow, calls for more balance rarely attend works that focus entirely on European influences.

Some other wonderful exceptions that detail African influence are Mechal Sobel's book on how deeply African ideas of time, spirit, and death influenced the southern United States in the eighteenth century;<sup>13</sup> John Thornton's book shattering myths about African passivity, lack of technology, and economic weakness in the colonial encounter and suggesting how Africans controlled these encounters;<sup>14</sup> Françoise Lionnet's work on the "mark" that African Creole culture left on Baudelaire's poetry;<sup>15</sup> Keith Cartwright's book on how the philosophy of Africa's Senegambian region shaped the work of American canonical writers;<sup>16</sup> and Sterling Stuckey's work on how African thought infused the work of Herman Melville.<sup>17</sup> The last two may be seen as responding to Toni Morrison's call to examine "the ways in which the presence of Afro-Americans has shaped the choices, the language, the structure, and the meaning of so much American literature."<sup>18</sup> As these examples suggest,

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University Press, 1985), 286. This move is typical of colonial encounter literature: an introduction claiming mutual influence followed by a conclusion obliterating it.

<sup>11</sup> Judith Ann Carney, *Black Rice: The African Origins of Rice Cultivation in the Americas* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2001).

<sup>12</sup> Philip D. Morgan, "Review of *Black Rice: The African Origins of Rice Cultivation in the Americas* by Judith Carney," *William and Mary Quarterly* 59, no. 3 (July 2002): 739–742. For another critique, see David Eltis, Philip D. Morgan, and David Richardson, "Agency and Diaspora in Atlantic History: Reassessing the African Contribution to Rice Cultivation in the Americas," *American Historical Review* 112, no. 5 (December 2007): 1329–1358. For a defense of Carney's work, see Gwendolyn Midlo Hall, "Africa and Africans in the African Diaspora: The Uses of Relational Databases," *American Historical Review* 115, no. 1 (February 2010): 136–150.

<sup>13</sup> Mechal Sobel, *The World They Made Together: Black and White Values in Eighteenth-Century Virginia* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1987).

<sup>14</sup> John Kelly Thornton, *Africa and Africans in the Making of the Atlantic World, 1400–1800*, 2nd ed. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998).

<sup>15</sup> Françoise Lionnet, "Reframing Baudelaire: Literary History, Biography, Postcolonial Theory, and Vernacular Languages," *Diacritics* 28, no. 3 (Fall 1998): 63–85.

<sup>16</sup> Keith Cartwright, *Reading Africa into American Literature: Epics, Fables, and Gothic Tales* (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 2002).

<sup>17</sup> Sterling Stuckey, *African Culture and Melville's Art: The Creative Process in Benito Cereno and Moby-Dick* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2009).

<sup>18</sup> Toni Morrison, "Unspeakable Things Unspoken: The Afro-American Presence in American Literature," in *Tanner Lectures on Human Values* (given at Ann Arbor: University of Michigan,

however, when research on indigenous agency is conducted, it is more likely to be on the influence of Africans on the Americas than on Europe.

What is missing, then, in conceptualizing the agency of the colonized subject in the encounter with the colonizer, is a model that foregrounds the malleability of the colonizer. Europeans were acted upon, not always acting subjects, and were changed, often deeply and irrevocably, not only by their experiences but also by the deliberate actions and discourse of those they colonized. Postcolonial literary critics would do well to move beyond imagining powerful European authors deliberately and consciously selecting particular delicacies from the smorgasbord of other cultures. Authors are not always in control of themselves or their texts. We must add a perspective on the power of African peoples' representations to penetrate, we might even say animate or possess, European identities and literatures.

To succeed, such a model must also do a better job of foregrounding discourse and the way that it mediates encounter and forms subjects. In this book, following Foucault, discourse is a "group of statements" that both rise from and create certain "conditions of existence."<sup>19</sup> For instance, the Habesha's view of their own history is one such group of statements that creates certain conditions. The manifold articulations of the Habesha Queen of Sheba enabled such diverse forms as a dynasty and a new form of traditional painting.<sup>20</sup> A discursive system, then, is a collection of cultural themes or claims, that "body of anonymous historical rules, always determined in time and space, that have defined a given period and . . . a given social, economic, geographical or linguistic area."<sup>21</sup> Each discursive system has "governing statements" that tend to hold fast, that constitute and are constituted by social identities and beliefs.<sup>22</sup> At the same time, while particular discourses generate particular societies, they are not all-powerful. There can be competing discourses, and an individual can be shaped by a discourse from outside.

### The Discursive Possession Model

Building on the five previous models of colonial encounter, and offsetting the current ubiquity of the appropriation model, I propose a model called discursive possession. This new model can help us to think about how African discourse can animate European texts. In postcolonial and colonial studies, possession has usually been material, referring to the colonizer's possession of the colonized's land, resources, and bodies. I urge turning the term on its material head. In many cultures,

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on October 7, 1988). Available at: <http://www.tannerlectures.utah.edu/lectures/documents/morrison90.pdf>

<sup>19</sup> Michel Foucault, *Archeology of Knowledge* (1972; New York: Routledge, 2002), 131.

<sup>20</sup> Isabel Boavida and Manuel Joao Ramos, "Ambiguous Legitimacy: The Legend of the Queen of Sheba in Popular Ethiopian Painting," *Annales d'Ethiopie* 21 (2005): 85–92.

<sup>21</sup> Foucault, *Archeology of Knowledge*, 131.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*, 164.

spiritual possession is a way of thinking about asymmetrical relationships between subjectivities. In this folk paradigm, spiritual possession is a loss of control that results in an openness to difference, a penetrability, which in turn results in the dissolution of subjectivity and the formation of an indeterminate hybridity. If literary critics understand the term “spirit” as another way of thinking about “discourse,” we can use the paradigm of spirit possession to comprehend how an author can be taken over by the other. By decentering Cartesian models of the author as rational, unitary, and autonomous—operating independently of external forces—spirit possession is a valuable metaphor that can help us to think about how discourses and identities circulate across boundaries and through authors. It enables us to read European texts ordinarily classified as orientalist (i.e., as examples of appropriation) as also exhibiting aspects of African thought, as culturally heterogeneous texts constructed through the mediated agency of their European authors.

To make an argument about discursive possession is to make an argument against the authority of authors and to insist that authors can be the function of texts, even texts from outside the hegemonic systems in which they participate. Possession can help scholars to think more clearly about the influence on Europe of its others because it enables us to locate agency outside of the European traveler, author, intellectual. It prevents us from assuming that Europeans are in control of themselves, their representations, or their texts. It allows us to see the double truth of Thomas Browne’s famous quote that “We carry within us the wonders we seek without us: there is all Africa and her prodigies in us.” That is, Europeans carry their own projections about the other (e.g., the two-faced or headless people who appear on early European maps of Africa) but also carry, often unaware, the other’s self-projections (e.g., the worldviews embedded in the African place-names’ meanings on those maps).

Such a model would enable scholars to remember that European travelers to Africa created texts about those places partly based on the oral and written statements that they encountered. For the European traveler moved through a riotous environment of representations abroad—overheard conversations, gossip, the mannerisms of a passerby on the street, the insults of a shopkeeper, the tale of a traveler, the false compliance of servants, the behavior of children in the presence of elders, and so on. These self-representations participated in shaping the European author’s subsequent representations of that other, however distorted. European texts include the European author’s representation of other human beings’ *self*-representations, an interpretation of another culture’s interpretations, a personification of others’ created personae. European authors encountered thousands of individuals’ self-representations and created texts that must be seen as emerging partly from the original representers’ alterity. That is, the dominant models have been limited not only by a discomfort with the power of the colonized subject to affect the colonizer but also a failure to recognize that Africans produce discourse. This failure, when combined with Western ignorance about the content of those oral and written texts and their circulation in the West, creates a lacuna in postcolonial studies.

I theorize discursive possession as follows. Discourse, like a virus or a spirit, can slip into a host. (In theoretical terms, viruses and spirits work alike, for “scientific thought is only a more perfected form of religious thought.”<sup>23</sup> Both are vitalities present in the body but separate from it.) Such foreign bodies permanently mark their hosts—leaving scars, exposing vulnerabilities, strengthening resilience, creating new behaviors, shaping thought. Through intimate contact, these agents of the other spread, momentarily taking over or possessing their hosts. Under the influence, the host then produces objects (e.g., mutations and tales) that are partially animated by this other. These objects likewise circulate and possess other individuals and the objects they produce (e.g., infections or poems). In the case of a traveler, discursive possession may lead him or her to write a journal or an account shaped in part by the self-representations and discursive system encountered abroad, that is, a text through which other texts and voices speak. A body through which others speak is called an *energumen*: literally, as the *Oxford English Dictionary* puts it, “one that is wrought upon.”<sup>24</sup> Conceiving of European texts and authors as that which are wrought upon, as *energumens*, proves a useful resource for critical thought in postcolonial studies.

The spirit possession paradigm's rejection of the idea of an autonomous human subject is not far from recent critical theory. Just as poststructuralists posit the author as the function of discourse, likewise, the believer imagines the soul as the function of a “collective patrimony.”<sup>25</sup> Neither sees the individual as self-inventing but as a refraction of a collective representation: society. Neither sees individuals as entirely aware of their own processes of creation or in control of the objects they create. Neither sees individuals as stable beings who command language but as belated beings articulated by language (“in the beginning was the word . . . and the word became flesh, and dwelt among us”).<sup>26</sup> What literary scholars attribute to “discourse” (which produces and is the product of social hegemony), religious peoples attribute to “ancestral spirits,” who guide individuals in reproducing the values of the collective. What Foucault conceives of as the “outside”—a “prediscursive” place<sup>27</sup> where individuals “allow themselves to be reached by these enigmatic, insistent words that *come from elsewhere*” (my italics)<sup>28</sup>—religious peoples conceive of as an insistent Other. Only the terms are different.

<sup>23</sup> Émile Durkheim, *The Elementary Forms of Religious Life*, trans. Karen E. Fields (1912; New York: Free Press, 1995), 431.

<sup>24</sup> In the eighteenth century, “energumen” was an uncommon term for a person who appeared to be possessed by a spirit, one mark of which was being spoken through, xenoglossia. For an early instance of the term “energumen,” see Joseph Bingham, *Origines Ecclesiasticae: or, the Antiquities of the Christian Church*, vol. 2 (London: R. Knaplock, 1710).

<sup>25</sup> Durkheim, *Religious Life*, 276.

<sup>26</sup> John 1:1, 14.

<sup>27</sup> Michel Foucault, “Maurice Blanchot: The Thought from Outside,” in *Foucault/Blanchot* (New York: Zone Books, 1966), 22.

<sup>28</sup> Michel Foucault, “Ceci n'est pas une pipe (This Is Not a Pipe),” *October* 1 (Spring 1976): 15, as interpreted by Jeremy R. Carrette, *Foucault and Religion: Spiritual Corporality and Political Spirituality* (New York: Routledge, 2000), 172.

The believer has a vivid model of what happens in this encounter between alterities, however. That is, when an individual encounters other societies, that alternate discourse can be so powerful that it momentarily ruptures the individual's connection to his or her own society, splitting the unification of a human soul with its own collectivity. This rupture is called possession, and when it happens, the individual then thinks and acts in ways foreign to the social organization of which he or she is part. Westerners sometimes call this "going native," when a person has been fully assimilated into the other while often remaining visibly (and risibly) foreign. My focus is on those who have not traveled and who do not appear foreign but who have experienced a rupture with their own collectivity, however momentary or partial.

A focus on this other meaning of possession, spiritual rather than material, necessarily inspires some challenges. For many, to speak of spirit possession is to speak of an irrational superstition without a cognitive basis. For them, agency can only ever be located in the human self, not outside it. The individual is rational, autonomous, and free acting, never inhabited. But the nonautonomous model of agency inherent in spirit possession, the concept of an outside, of a penetrated self, is precisely why the term is so useful for thinking about the encounter between Europe and its others. In spirit possession, an individual is taken over, or allows the self to be taken over, by difference. Something radically other occupies the individual. The self becomes marked by foreign tongues, alien behaviors, and strange movements. While European scholarship explains away spirit possession as the exhibition of fractured portions of the possessed person's own self or society,<sup>29</sup> this is not the understanding of practitioners. They understand it as the penetration of forces outside of the self or even their society. They understand it as being animated from outside.

It is not my aim to argue for or against the idea that human beings can "actually" be taken over by spirits or that there is such a thing as supernatural, suprahuman forces. Rather, I want to argue that the concept of possession—the idea that the self can be taken over by something outside of it—represents a useful paradigm of agency. In other words, such spiritual beliefs are not irrational and false, "nothing more than a system of hallucinations," but, as the French sociologist Émile Durkheim eloquently put it, are "grounded in and express the real."<sup>30</sup> Both science and religion, he pointed out, "attempt to connect things to one another, establish internal relations between those things."<sup>31</sup> Religious beliefs such as spirit possession

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<sup>29</sup> For an excellent review of the literature on spirit possession as the acting out of social forces, see Mary Keller, *The Hammer and the Flute: Women, Power, and Spirit Possession* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2002). Previously, see Evans-Pritchard who saw spirits as "refractions of social realities"; E. E. Evans-Pritchard, *Nuer Religion* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1956), 106; and L. Lévy-Bruhl, *How Natives Think* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1910).

<sup>30</sup> Durkheim, *Religious Life*, iv, 2. For a brilliant critique of work like Durkheim's, see Christopher Bracken, *Magical Criticism: The Recourse of Savage Philosophy* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2007).

<sup>31</sup> Durkheim, *Religious Life*, 431.

are merely alternative theories of control and the limits of social order. In this case, they better articulate a truth about discourse than scholarly models of encounter.

Another objection to a theory of discursive possession is that relying on a religious paradigm to describe the interaction of African and European discursive systems may seem to veer suspiciously close to primitivizing or romanticizing Africa through old stereotypes of African cultures as prelogical and superstitious. I do not mean to imply that Africa is magical and Europe is scientific, or that African discourses are uniquely or primarily religious.<sup>32</sup> Quite the contrary. Just because Europeans project a belief in possession onto their others, and condemn it as magic, is not an argument against possession as a useful paradigm. Such prejudice may in fact be an argument for the paradigm, since condemnation of an idea often indicates a locus of some power.

Another objection is that spirit possession is too rudimentary a paradigm to be useful. Twenty-first-century Euro-Americans tend to have unsophisticated understandings of spirit possession, fed by such reductive representations as *The Exorcist* and *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*.<sup>33</sup> In Hollywood, spirit possession is all negative, the horrific work of demons bent on total destruction and who manifest through inhuman behavior and voices. Yet, in many places in the world, spirit possession constitutes an immense range of complex interpretive and ritualistic practices. For instance, possession is not always negative, but can be beneficial, especially if the individual fully enters into the experience.<sup>34</sup> Possession is not a total consumption of or destruction of individual agency. Possession is always partial, always in flux, sometimes more intense, sometimes unexpectedly departed. It is not invincible but always incomplete, failed. And also, recurring. Yet, in all cases, possession is attended by a loss of agency, however temporary or partial.

Indeed, because the experience can be positive, some individuals deliberately form relationships with the other in order to take on the other's powers and perform special forms of mimesis.<sup>35</sup> Thus, there is *unwilled* possession (in which the individual is so taken over that all communications become unintelligible) and *willed* mediumship (in which an individual becomes an intelligible intermediary between

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<sup>32</sup> For a cogent case against seeing African cultures as more religious than scientific, see Kwame Gyekye, "Philosophy, Culture, and Technology in the Postcolonial," in *Postcolonial African Philosophy: A Critical Reader*, ed. Emmanuel Chukwudi Eze (Cambridge, MA: Blackwell, 1997), 27.

<sup>33</sup> Gallup has polled Americans' spiritual beliefs since 1990 and asked subjects if "people on this earth are sometimes possessed by the devil" and whether a "spirit-being [can] temporarily assume control of a human body during a trance." The 2005 poll found that 41 percent of Americans believed in the first type of malign possession while only 9 percent believed in the second type of benign or welcomed possession; David W. Moore, "Three in Four Americans Believe in Paranormal: Little Change from Similar Results in 2001," *Gallup News Service*, June 16, 2005.

<sup>34</sup> Harald Aspen, *Amhara Traditions of Knowledge: Spirit Mediums and Their Clients* (Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz, 2001), 3.

<sup>35</sup> See Durkheim, *Religious Life*, 285.

humans and another collectivity).<sup>36</sup> Individuals who invite possession are sometimes known as priests, healers, or shamans—intermediaries powerful enough to retain agency during contact with the spiritual world. But they must also be acknowledged as artists because they produce objects to attract and represent the spirits—textual amulets, costumes and masks, dance and song, objects enabled by discourse. In either case, of willing or unwilling possession, penetration by the other happens because the individual came into contact with a contagious object—an imprecation, an ill-meaning glance, a charm, a forbidden ritual, a potent text—and thus opened him- or herself to the other's influence, another system of ideas. Under the influence, individuals sometimes became the function of this other system, producing texts shaped in part by the encountered self-representations and discourse. That is, they become energumens, and they produce energumens. Far from rudimentary, spirit possession is a rich paradigm for thinking about agency.

It may be objected that discursive possession does not work in only one direction, from the Habesha to the English, for instance. This is correct: Europeans also enact discursive possessions (e.g., *Pilgrim's Progress* animating texts across Africa in the early twentieth century).<sup>37</sup> It is the focus of this book, however, to examine the lesser-known possession of Europeans rather than *by* them. Further, given Europe's material possession of its colonies (stripping them of human and natural resources through military force and theft), scholars might do well to be wary of theorizing European discursive possession of its colonies. Some have said that they would like to use the concept for such purposes. But a focus on the immaterial may serve to mystify the very real costs of the material processes of colonial extraction. The model of agency in spirit possession is not needed to explain what happens to a man sold into American chattel slavery. That is, no model of the immaterial is needed to elucidate the agency of the materially possessed, the abjected.<sup>38</sup> Rather, because the model of discursive possession acknowledges asymmetrical relationships of power, it allows us to theorize how an individual with tremendous material power can lack agency, especially vis-à-vis the discourse and texts of the geopolitically lesser other.

Another objection may be that the word "possession" is unnecessarily provocative and that words like "influence" or "inspiration" or "infused" would as easily capture the relationship between texts. However, the original meaning of these four words is quite similar to possession, invoking the "breath" of the divine. All suggest that a person is acted upon by something from outside, something incorporeal.

<sup>36</sup> Aspen, *Amhara Traditions of Knowledge*, 27.

<sup>37</sup> Isabel Hofmeyr, *The Portable Bunyan: A Transnational History of The Pilgrim's Progress* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2004).

<sup>38</sup> Further, it might be argued that colonized subjects imitate the colonizers only *deliberately*. The disempowered consciously imitate the powerful through a "metonymy of presence" that "radically revalues . . . normative knowledges" and disturbs colonial hegemony. Thus, a model of spirit possession (i.e., a model of displaced agency) is not so apt for the colonized subject, whose agency while engaged in mimicry of the colonizer is knowing; Bhabha, *Location of Culture*, 89, 91.

The supernatural implications of “influence” or “inspiration” or “infused” have been attenuated through modern use; thus the use of the word “possession” merely brings to the fore what is embedded in all of them, an ancient conception of artistic creation as occurring outside of the artist’s subjectivity and control.<sup>39</sup> My intention in using the more transparent term is to recapture precisely this meaning and shift the focus from the agency of the European author to the author’s vulnerability and penetrability.

Finally, it may be objected that no new paradigm is needed to theorize this interaction. Intertextuality is a field already beautifully developed by Julia Kristeva, Mikhail Bakhtin, Roland Barthes, Jacques Derrida, and Michel Foucault. Influence studies, an earlier paradigm that emerged in the Age of Johnson, has also produced fascinating work.<sup>40</sup> My book squarely falls within these traditions—“literary history about agents” and “literary history about meshing systems”—depending on their tools and explanatory power.<sup>41</sup> Yet, as a scholar of African literature, I have noticed that such studies have not shifted the instinctive response of critics, students, and the general public to the dynamic between Western authors and non-Western discourse—they continue to assume that the former is more powerful than the latter. The paradigm of possession is a way of shocking the reader into recognition of a known but not incorporated truth about the author as the subject of discourse in the transcultural context. To say that Samuel Johnson appropriated African discourse (or drew on, promoted, assimilated, copied, resisted, rewrote, reacted to, responded to, alluded to, and so on), or even was influenced by African discourse, is not disturbing. To say that Samuel Johnson was possessed by African discourse is. This discomfort is what makes the paradigm powerful, as it radically curtails persistent assumptions about authorial agency. The possession paradigm is also useful because it tamps down a tendency in influence studies to obsess about the difference between mere resemblance and direct influence of texts. While the burden of proof still lies with the scholar, the paradigm suggests that the connection between authors and discourse is not easily teased out and cannot often be asserted,

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<sup>39</sup> Socrates says to the poet Ion, “Your speaking well about Homer is not an art . . . but a divine power which moves you”; Plato, “Ion,” in *The Dialogues of Plato: Ion, Hippias Minor, Laches, Protagoras* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1998), 3:13. “The Muse herself causes men to be inspired, and through these inspired men a chain of others are possessed and suspended. For all our good epic poets speak all their beautiful poems, not through art, but because they’re inspired and possessed. . . . Lyric poets do not compose these beautiful songs in their right minds, but when they step to the mode and the rhythm they are filled with Bacchic frenzy and possessed” (13). Ion protests to Socrates that he cannot convince Ion that “I’m possessed and mad when I praise Homer” (16).

<sup>40</sup> “Concern with influence arose in conjunction with the mid-eighteenth-century interest in originality and genius,” when critics looked “for influences that lessen an author’s claim to genius and for poets, bent on immortality, to guard against such influences by searching for the new in both style and subject matter”; Jay Clayton and Eric Rothstein, “Figures in the Corpus: Theories of Influence and Intertextuality,” in *Influence and Intertextuality in Literary History*, ed. Jay Clayton and Eric Rothstein (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1991), 4–5.

<sup>41</sup> *Ibid.*, 17.



yet exists. The paradigm also reminds us that texts are not the direct expression of an author's feelings and that psychoanalytic theories of the unconscious, which assume interiority rather than exteriority, are helpful but not entirely adequate for the transcultural context.

Some concrete examples of spirit possession may better illustrate the paradigm's usefulness. The case of Tchamba spirit possession is particularly helpful in conceptualizing the analogical relation between spiritual and discursive possession, since the two are intertwined here. As outlined by the German anthropologist Tobias Wendl, the Mina are a cultural group who live in West Africa and were involved during the eighteenth century in enslaving those from the Tchamba cultural group to the north.<sup>42</sup> The Mina do not believe that this part of their history is done with, but suspect that their past iniquities have created powerful forces that haunt their present. Specifically, the Mina are among several groups in what is now Ghana and Togo who believe that the spirits of those whom they enslaved can possess them. Because they did not give the Tchamba slaves proper burial rites, the Mina believe that the slaves could not transform themselves into proper ancestral spirits but instead became "malicious" wandering spirits who long for revenge on their former masters. These ill-treated spirits, longing for their ancestral homes but unable to return to them, act out their displeasure by taking over Mina individuals. That is, some Mina act like members of the Tchamba culture.

If a Mina individual suspects that the spirit of a Tchamba slave has possessed him or her, he or she goes to a diviner to find out if this is the case. If it is, the possessed person appeases the possessing spirit by engaging in acts of mimesis related to the possessing spirit, for instance, wearing iron shackles or carrying the cowry shells used to pay for slaves. He or she also builds a shrine for the spirit that reproduces the signs of the culture from which it came. These shrines of mimesis, elaborate acts of creation, are "mini-ethnographies" designed to resemble the spirit's culture so that, drawn by familiarity, the spirit will withdraw to live in the shrine.<sup>43</sup> These invented homes of the enslaved are never exact reproductions, of course; they are tainted by the culture of the enslaver. But the invented texts of the shrines, however misrepresentative, remain a trace of the former slaves and a victory over historical and social exclusion, as they and their lost homes are reinscribed in the memory of their oppressors. Mina individuals behave like the enslaved Tchamba, partly through imitating a projected other, but partly from their experience of Tchamba self-representations. The Mina create texts about the Tchamba as an appropriation of that culture but also as an exorcism of its very real power over their imagination. To analyze the Mina's experiences of possession only through the typical postcolonial appropriation model is to reject the Mina's own understanding of transculturation.

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<sup>42</sup> Tobias Wendl, "Slavery, Spirit Possession and Ritual Consciousness: The Tchamba Cult among the Mina of Togo," in *Spirit Possession: Modernity and Power in Africa*, ed. Heike Behrend and Ute Luig (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1999), 114.

<sup>43</sup> *Ibid.*, 116–117.

The Mina do not see themselves as appropriating Tchamba culture but as possessed by it. The Mina's theory of spirit possession imagines that the play of power occurs not just on the material field of chronological history or the global economy but in the immaterial field of the psyche. Power in one field must be countered by power in the other even if, as in this case, such actions never fully counteract the powerful vengeance of the wronged, who continue to dominate Mina lives. Rather, the positive contribution of the ritual is to remind the living that others can determine your relation to the world, that conquerors and victims are forever intertwined, and that those who suffered in the past can drive the present.

The Habesha likewise have rituals of spirit possession. The so-called Zar spirit possession cult involves mimesis as well, beautifully described by Irene Albers as a "theater of alterity."<sup>44</sup> The detection and appeasement of Zar spirits is a practice that started in the Ethiopian highlands as early as the 1500s but is now common throughout northeast Africa (Sudan, Djibouti, Somalia, and southern Egypt) and parts of Arabia and southern Iran.<sup>45</sup> Although condemned by governments, imams, and priests, it continues to grow.

The rituals around Zar spirit possession invite interpretation. When an individual stops functioning socially (e.g., withdraws from human contact, stops speaking, stops moving, stops leaving the house or bed), friends and family suspect that the disassociated person is possessed by something other. Among the Habesha, they then call on a ደብተራ *däbtära*, a literate lay priest and scribe who, in this case, is also a shaman. Zar practitioners believe that once possessed, the spirit never leaves, but that an individual can be reconciled with the spirit through the ritual. Therefore, the ritual is not about exorcizing the spirit but about marshaling the energy of the spirit for good. Ritual renders the presence of the other beneficial.

The first task of the shaman is to identify which Zar spirit is responsible for the possession, as there are many of them. The Zar is always something foreign to the individual:<sup>46</sup> if the person is male, the Zar may be female; if Christian, then the Zar may be Islamic or a traditional believer; if highborn, lowborn; if ordinary, a historical figure; if Sudanese, an American or Somalian; and so on. Spirit possession is "making use of the Other to differentiate the self."<sup>47</sup> That is, the Zar may be

<sup>44</sup> Irene Albers, "Mimesis and Alterity: Michel Leiris's Ethnography and Poetics of Spirit Possession," *French Studies* 62, no. 3 (July 2008): 271–289.

<sup>45</sup> Belief in Zar spirits "may be at least as old as the sixteenth century and probably had its origin in the culture contact between the Christian Amhara and the Cushites, when the former conceived of the Cushitic sky god as an evil spirit"; Richard Natvig, "Oromos, Slaves, and the Zar Spirits: A Contribution to the History of the Zar Cult," *International Journal of African Historical Studies* 20, no. 4 (1987): 669–689.

<sup>46</sup> "Difference of some sort between the portrayer and the portrayed is an absolute prerequisite for mimetic behavior," and "mimesis of other people comes about when cultures mix, when someone lives in another society as a stranger, and where a society comes in contact with other cultures through the strangers it has accommodated"; Fritz Kramer, *The Red Fez: Art and Spirit Possession in Africa* (London: Verso, 1993), 250–251.

<sup>47</sup> Heike Behrend and Ute Luig, "Introduction," in *Spirit Possession: Modernity and Power in Africa*, ed. Heike Behrend and Ute Luig (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1999), xviii.

from any form of alterity with which the person has come into contact. As Alfred Gell has articulated, “to perceive (to internalize) is to imitate, and thus we become (and produce) what we perceive.”<sup>48</sup>

Once the Zar is identified and called forth, the Zar descends into the individual and instructs him or her in how to behave. The individual begins to produce mimetic discourse—speaking in the voice of the other and generating mannerisms that express an other. For instance, if a female Zar possesses a man, “he manifests characteristics regarded in the culture as feminine, such as silly gaiety and teasing behavior.”<sup>49</sup> To achieve reconciliation with the spirit, the possessed person then wears the clothing and accessories appropriate for that spirit’s character.<sup>50</sup> Through trances induced by drumming, dancing, scents, and singing, the individual and the other are united, the spirit is appeased by a sacrifice, and the strengthened individual can return to regular life. Many enjoy this process of performance, and regular participation ensures that the illness will not return.

Anthropologists have tended to interpret these rituals as demonstrations of agency, as forms of resistance.<sup>51</sup> They point out that it is often the weak and marginalized who become possessed (although some have demonstrated that those with unusual and powerful creative gifts also become possessed).<sup>52</sup> Because gender categories are normative, for instance, the ritual allows transgendered individuals to express their “true” identities. Disempowered women get to behave as powerful men and demand the accoutrement of power, such as alcohol and cigarettes. But, again, this interpretation is not the understanding of practitioners, who believe that individuals are being animated from that which is outside of them. They believe that they are not in control of sometimes behaving as a woman or sometimes behaving as a man. And this view should not surprise us. If one asks an American man why he cross-dresses, the answer can often be “I don’t know, I just feel compelled to do it.” People everywhere participate in the mimesis of alterity while describing their motivation as inexplicable. The scholar may say that the possessed are actively pretending to be an alter ego, acting out a fantasy, but the scholar should say that the discourse of the other is what allows one to become other. Femininity is a discourse that enables one to be feminine, even without consciously choosing to be so. That is, as Judith Butler articulated, one performs one’s gender within social norms: “One is dependent on this ‘outside’ to lay claim to what is one’s own.

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<sup>48</sup> Alfred Gell, *Art and Agency: An Anthropological Theory* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998).

<sup>49</sup> Simon D. Messing, “Group Therapy and Social Status in the Zar Cult of Ethiopia,” *American Anthropologist* 60, no. 6 (December 1958): 1120–1126.

<sup>50</sup> Baqie Badawi Muhammad, “The Sudanese Concept of Beauty, Spirit Possession, and Power,” *Folklore Forum* 26, nos. 1/2 (1993): 58.

<sup>51</sup> For a discussion of “the debate between politically instrumental and expressive interpretations,” see David Pratten, “Mystics and Missionaries: Narratives of the Spirit Movement in Eastern Nigeria,” *Social Anthropology/Anthropologie Sociale* 15, no. 1 (February 2007): 47–70.

<sup>52</sup> Messing, “Zar Cult of Ethiopia.”

The self must, in this way, be dispossessed in sociality in order to take possession of itself."<sup>53</sup>

Part of the reason that anthropologists may have studied spirit possession so closely is that it feels familiar. Anthropologists have used it to explain their own lack of agency vis-à-vis the other. In her work on the Zar, Janice Boddy points out that spirit possession and anthropology are similar practices. Like possession, fieldwork forces the anthropologist to become "lost from her socially constructed self" through "learning what it means to be the other." As a result, "the spirits of our informants remain with us long after we have returned from the field. . . . We, too, [like the Zar practitioners] transform our experiences of otherness into cultural texts."<sup>54</sup> The anthropologist is another who produces energumens, texts through which the other speaks.

How do these two examples of spirit possession—among the Mina and the Habesha—aid us in thinking about authors and texts? They allow us to imagine the relationship of European authors like Samuel Johnson to African discourse in a way that does not foreground European authorial agency. They allow us to imagine Johnson—the foremost arbiter of eighteenth-century English literary taste—in the following fashion.

The Habesha, the imperial people of highland Ethiopia and Eritrea, have been engaged for more than two thousand years in sophisticated and systematic broadcasting about their exceptional origin, exemplary religion, and ancient culture—broadcasting so successful that it has infused discursive formations far from East Africa. The system of social knowledge through which the Habesha have constructed and ordered their world, their discursive system, enabled them to maintain and extend power over their neighbors and influence what distant foreigners thought of them. A seventeenth-century Portuguese Jesuit named Jerónimo (Jerome) Lobo came into contact with this discourse while living in the Ethiopian highlands for ten years, discourse that left traces in his thought (for foreign discourse does press on individual wills, through the contagion of another collectivity). He then wrote a book about those experiences, *Itinerário*, which a priest named Joachim Le Grand found and translated into French as *Voyage Historique d'Abissinie*.

In his early twenties, Samuel Johnson came into contact with this contagious energumen and translated it into English, opening himself to the influence of the other. It is easy to forget that the first book by this central figure of eighteenth-century literature was about the Habesha, a book that described the annihilation of an early European colonial effort, *A Voyage to Abyssinia*. This foreign body permanently marked Johnson, leaving traces of its presence in the forms

<sup>53</sup> Judith Butler, *Undoing Gender* (New York: Routledge, 2004), 7. Gender is a "free-floating artifice," a "discursive/cultural means" by which nature is produced; Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*, 10th ed. (New York: Routledge, 1999), 10.

<sup>54</sup> Janice Boddy, *Wombs and Alien Spirits: Women, Men and the Zar Cult in Northern Sudan* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1989), 358. Irene Albers discusses others who have associated the practice of anthropology with spirit possession; Albers, "Mimesis and Alterity," 287.

of Habesha names, places, themes, and concepts. These appeared repeatedly in Johnson's fictions, many of which are about the Habesha and had a strangely native perspective. That is, Johnson also produced energumens, texts animated by the other's discourse.

These texts then proliferated through the technology of the press and circulated as contagious objects, multiplying through processes of association, mimesis, metaphor, practice, and perception, even coming to alter the discursive system into which they entered. In particular, the text of Johnson's *Rasselas* was very communicable, with other authors translating it into dozens of languages<sup>55</sup> or writing sequels<sup>56</sup> or related adventure stories<sup>57</sup> or literary criticism on it, further circulating ever more distorted Habesha claims. As a result of reading the book, some readers grow so interested that they traveled to Abyssinia themselves.<sup>58</sup> Emancipated slaves took the name Rasselas,<sup>59</sup> learning of a place in Africa where black Christian kings ruled. Each made decisions that enabled the reproduction of Habesha self-representations (many of which are extraordinarily resilient, such as the Habesha claim to be the homeland of the Queen of Sheba), as discursive possession happened from text to text, person to person, text to person, and person to text. The circulation of the energumen enabled the lesser possession of other authors, who also produced energumens.

A theory of discursive possession also allows us to read *Rasselas* as an act of mimesis performed by Johnson to display and attempt to control the Habesha discourse he encountered as a young man when he translated *Voyage Historique d'Abissinie*. Having submitted to the fascination of the previous text, *Rasselas* is both an "imaginary ethnography"<sup>60</sup> based on Johnson's reading and a "radical form of autobiography"<sup>61</sup> about his captivation by that reading. *Rasselas* is a

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<sup>55</sup> *Rasselas* was translated into many languages, including Arabic, Armenian, and Bengali, with multiple translations into other European languages, including thirteen into Italian, eighteen into German, and fifty-six into French; see John David Fleeman, *A Bibliography of the Works of Samuel Johnson: Treating His Published Works* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), 1:785–989.

<sup>56</sup> Ellis Cornelia Knight, *Dinarbas, a Tale: Being a Continuation of Rasselas, Prince of Abissinia*, ed. Ann Messenger (1790; East Lansing, MI: East Lansing Coleagues Press, 1993); Elizabeth Pope Whately, *The Second Part of the History of Rasselas, Prince of Abyssinia* (London: John W. Parker, 1835).

<sup>57</sup> Henry Rider Haggard, *Queen Sheba's Ring* (London: E. Nash, 1910).

<sup>58</sup> For a brief book on several centuries of English travel writing about Abyssinia after *Rasselas*, see W. B. Carnochan, *Golden Legends: Images of Abyssinia, Samuel Johnson to Bob Marley* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2008). One example of such writing about Abyssinia is Thomas Pakenham, *The Mountains of Rasselas*, rev. ed. (1959; London: Seven Dials, 1999). For an anthology of such texts, see Richard Pankhurst, ed., *Travellers in Ethiopia* (London: Oxford University Press, 1965).

<sup>59</sup> Thomas Keymer, "Introduction," in *The History of Rasselas, Prince of Abissinia* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), xxxii.

<sup>60</sup> Gabriele Schwab, "Literary Transference and the Vicissitudes of Culture," in *REAL: Yearbook of Research in English and American Literature*, vol. 12, *The Anthropological Turn in Literary Studies*, ed. Jürgen Schlaeger (Tübingen: Gunter Narr, 1996), 118.

<sup>61</sup> Albers, "Mimesis and Alterity," 283.

representation Johnson created to materialize the former text's intangible effect on him. The distortion of Habesha discourse found in the text is a necessary part of this cathartic creative process. For authenticity is not the mark of possession. The mark of possession is a compulsion to imitate the other, to capture it and bind it to an object (e.g., a book) that is not the self. Through this, the author mitigates the other while conferring to him- or herself the benefits of that other. Thus, *Rasselas* is evidence both of an author's discursive possession and of his attempt to leave that possession behind, as well as an energumen that enacts discursive possession on other authors and texts by exercising a strange power over its many readers.

To summarize, then, discursive possession is a process of transcultural intertextuality in the context of asymmetrical power relationships during which foreign discourse mediates authorial agency such that an author is taken over by the representations of the other and compelled to engage in acts of mimesis related to that possession, producing texts, or energumens, animated by that alterity. The powerful metaphor of spirit possession enables us to see that any text contains the irreducible residue of the encounters that formed it. The Western literary canon is a vast graveyard haunted by self-representing others, whose voices become the uncanny language of the very text that participates in constituting the other as an object of knowledge. The legible sign of the invisible other appears through the text that displaces heterogeneity even while being transformed by it.

### Africa, Europe, and the Habesha as Subjects

A challenge in writing about how African discourse animates European literature is deploying the problematic terms "Africa" and "Europe," which have been deconstructed and remapped so many times as to simultaneously signify nothing and everything. While acknowledging that the terms "Europe" and "European" are problematic, I have continued to use them in this book as a shorthand for discursive formations developed mainly among the peoples of the European continent and also used in colonizing peoples of Asia, Africa, and the Americas. A shorthand is necessary, since Habesha discourse entered so many European languages and texts, including those in Latin, English, French, German, Italian, Spanish, and Portuguese. Further, it aids readers in rethinking their images of "Europe," a contested geopolitical term that remains powerful in the twenty-first century. To retain it is to suggest how it can be dismantled. Therefore, "Europe" and "European" are used for the dominant discursive systems in the colonizing countries of England, France, Germany, Portugal, Spain, Italy, Holland, Belgium, Sweden, and Denmark, as well as those cultures as manifested in the United States, Canada, and Australia.

In this book, "Africa" means the whole continent, including North Africa. Yet, to avoid treating the African continent as a uniform whole, this book focuses not on Africa writ large, nor a particular region (West, South, East, or North Africa), nor even a particular country. Rather, it focuses on a particular culture as a case—the

Habesha. The Habesha are the peoples of the Ethiopian highlands (modern-day Ethiopia and Eritrea) who have traditionally written in the Afro-Asiatic language of ግዕዝ Gəʿəz and speak modern languages descended from Gəʿəz. They have long seen themselves as having a distinct identity. I have chosen to use the term “Habesha” for this culture, rather than “Ethiopian,” “Eritrean,” “Abyssinian,” “Amhara,” or “Tigrinya,” because these other words have changed meanings regularly over the centuries, do not refer to the whole, or are ethnically charged. By using this term, I do not mean to imply that the Habesha as peoples have been static, uniform, or unchanging (as I clarify in chapter 1), but rather that their distinctive self-narratives of religious election and exceptionalism have been remarkably persistent in their own texts and in the texts of those who have met them.

I have also chosen the term “Habesha” because the Gəʿəz word ሐበሳ (ḥabāśa) is a self-designation for the peoples of the Ethiopian highlands.<sup>62</sup> The ethnonym appears very early, in first millennium B.C.E. inscriptions in the Ethiopian highlands, as ḥbšt (the land) and ḥbšn (the people).<sup>63</sup> It is the source of similar words for Ethiopian highlanders in other languages: aḥābīs, al-habasah, ḥabašī, Habessinia, and Abyssinia.<sup>64</sup> To simplify this book, the word is spelled without diacritics and phonetically, as “Habesha” (with an “e” as it is pronounced in modern Amharic or Təgrəñña: ha-be-sha), while transliterating all other Gəʿəz words according to the *Encyclopaedia Aethiopica* transcription system, established by a board of linguists.<sup>65</sup> Another term for the peoples of the Ethiopian highlands is አግዛዥ ላግግግ, ḥAgʿazəyān, an ancient Habesha word that means “the people who are free” or “the people who speak Gəʿəz.”<sup>66</sup> But the term “Habesha” is in more common use today and is deliberately being used by young Ethiopians and Eritreans to forge connections across time and space.

I avoid the term “Ethiopian,” as it is the most capricious, across a range of languages.<sup>67</sup> Among early modern Europeans, “Ethiopian” meant anyone black. In the

<sup>62</sup> Walter W. Muller, “Ḥabašāt,” in *Encyclopaedia Aethiopica*, vol. 2, *D–Ha*, ed. Siegbert Uhlig (Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz, 2005), 948–949.

<sup>63</sup> Rainer Voigt, “Abyssinia,” in *Encyclopaedia Aethiopica*, vol. 1, *A–C*, ed. Siegbert Uhlig (Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz, 2003), 59–65.

<sup>64</sup> John Wansbrough, “Gentilics and Appellatives: Notes on Aḥābīs Qurayš,” *Bulletin of the School of Oriental and African Studies, University of London* 49, no. 1 (1986): 203–210.

<sup>65</sup> Siegbert Uhlig, ed., *Encyclopaedia Aethiopica*, vol. 1, *A–C* (Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz, 2003). Quite a bit of variation attends the transliteration of Gəʿəz words in scholarly works, especially regarding vowels.

<sup>66</sup> Alexander Sima, “Agʿazi,” in *Encyclopaedia Aethiopica*, vol. 1, *A–C*, ed. Siegbert Uhlig (Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz, 2003), 144–145. For instance, an original manuscript in Gəʿəz from the early fifteenth century refers to “behera ḥAgʿāzi” (land of the ḥAgʿāzi); Giyorgis di Sagla, *Il Libro del Mistero di Giyorgis di Sagla (Mashafa Mestir): Parte Prima (Italian)*, ed. Yacob Beyene, Corpus Scriptorum Christianorum Orientalium, vol. 515/516 (Louvain: Peeters, 1990); Giyorgis di Sagla, *Il Libro del Mistero di Giyorgis di Sagla (Mashafa Mestir): Parte Seconda (Italian)*, ed. Yacob Beyene, Corpus Scriptorum Christianorum Orientalium, vol. 532/533 (Louvain: Peeters, 1993).

<sup>67</sup> For instance, see John Michael Archer, *Old Worlds: Egypt, Southwest Asia, India, and Russia in Early Modern English Writing* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2001). Many

Old Testament and among ancient Greeks, an Ethiopian was anyone from south of Egypt. Over time, the Greeks often came to use the term more narrowly for those from Nubia—south of Egypt, north of Ethiopia, and now part of Sudan. For instance, in the New Testament, Queen Candace's eunuch is an "Ethiopian" who is more likely from Nubia. Likewise, in the third-century Greek novel *Aethiopica*, those from Meroë (Nubia) are called "Ethiopians" while the Habesha are called "Aksumites" (those from the Ethiopian highland empire of Aksum). In English literature, Auf der Maur argues, the two terms "Ethiopia" and "Abyssinia" came to stand simply for the most popular negative and positive stereotypes of African cultures, respectively.<sup>68</sup> To confuse matters more, the terms "India" and "Indians" were often used by ancient and medieval Europeans for East Africans and often quite specifically for the people of the Ethiopian highlands.<sup>69</sup> Rufinus, for instance, in the fourth century C.E. describes many specific aspects of the Aksumite empire, including kings' names, but calls it "India." The Jesuits who lived in Ethiopia in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries also referred to it as "India."<sup>70</sup> These confusions are why using another term than "Ethiopian" is so important.

By selecting the Habesha as a case, I do not mean to imply that Habesha discourse can stand for all African discourse. The Habesha of East Africa are so different from, for example, the Akan of West Africa as to instantaneously make nonsense of the omnibus term "Africa." There are no archetypal African discourses. The Habesha culture is an African case, not an Africa signifier. At the same time, my argument often refers to Habesha discourse as "African discourse." This reminds the reader that the Habesha live on the African continent and thus represent a case against reductive English representations of African peoples. Habesha discourse is an African discourse, it does not represent African discourses. Until the term "Africa" has been abandoned entirely, or is no longer a term for representing blank darkness or chaotic brutality, simply to pair the words "Africa" and "discourse" is a subversive act, one that can lead to a different global imaginary.

Although there are many reasons why the Habesha are a useful case to examine, I initially selected them for one reason. I knew them. I am not Habesha—I am a white, American, middle-class woman descended from Scottish Canadian sheepherders and generations of New England preachers and teachers—but because of

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etymologies have been proposed for the terms "Ethiopia" and "Abyssinia," but most have been contested.

<sup>68</sup> Lorenz Auf der Maur, "Ethiopia and Abyssinia in English Writing up to 1790," in *Proceedings of the XVth International Conference of Ethiopian Studies, Hamburg, July 20–25, 2003*, ed. Siegbert Uhlig (Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz, 2006), 523–532.

<sup>69</sup> "The 'confusion of Indias' that exists in the Greek and Latin notices also appears in Hebrew, Aramaic, and Syriac"; Philip Mayerson, "A Confusion of Indias: Asian India and African India in the Byzantine Sources," *Journal of the American Oriental Society* 113, no. 2 (April–June 1993): 174. He also notes, "The Further India of Rufinus, the Inner India of Socrates, and the Innermost India of Gelasius—was Axum" (171).

<sup>70</sup> Francisco Alvarez, *Verdadeira Informação das Terras do Preste João das Indias*, trans. A. Reis Machado (Lisbon: Agência Geral das Colónias, 1943).



my father's public health research, I grew up in the capital of the eighteenth-century Habesha empire, Gondär, in the late 1960s. As an adult, I have continued to focus on Ethiopia and Eritrea in my writing and research. While this makes my choice of the Habesha, as a useful African case, subjective and therefore questionable, I like to think that my agency is not entirely responsible for this selection. That is, I like to think that my lived experience is another proof of my argument. It is not just an accident that my twentieth-century American family happened to go to Gondär of all global destinations, nor that the continental governing body (the African Union) is located in Ethiopia, nor that the twentieth-century emperor of the Habesha, Haile Selassie, has been worshiped around the world by Rastafari. These facts also have to do with Habesha culture, with the power of its discursive conceptions of itself, and with its enduring discursive influence on the West.

Finally, little about the argument of this book will make sense without keeping front and center the following facts about the Habesha. They are Africans, although Western scholars long considered them as part of the "orient" and as "orientals." They have been Christians for millennia and not because of European missionaries. Habesha Christianity is very distinctive and holds some beliefs dear that are considered heretical by the Roman Catholic Church, Protestant churches, and Eastern Orthodoxy. The Habesha have been representing themselves in written texts in their own language and script of Gə'əz for more than two thousand years and have been producing bound manuscripts in their monastic scriptoria since at least the sixth century. Thus, scholars can compare seventeenth-century primary sources in Portuguese and Gə'əz to understand what happened in the early 1600s. Habesha monks have regularly traveled to and lived in Rome, Alexandria, and Jerusalem since the fourth century. The Habesha initiated contact with Europe during the Middle Ages, including establishing a monastery in Rome in the twelfth century. Through the 1400s, Habesha emperors regularly sent embassies to European kingdoms and councils. In the early 1500s, the Habesha were printing books in their own language in Rome. In the mid-1600s, Habesha scholars in Europe were contributing to European books about their culture and beliefs. Through these efforts at representing themselves, the Habesha shaped the opinions of many far from their shores.

### Structure of the Book

The first chapter lays out the ancient basis for the Habesha's claims for exceptional-ity, from their ancient empires through their early modern ones. Chapters 2 through 8 focus on how Habesha discourse circulated in Johnson's fiction. These chapters describe the multiple conflicting sources of Johnson's translation *A Voyage to Abyssinia*; how Habesha religious thought discussed in it may have enabled some of Johnson's religious beliefs; how Johnson's tragedy *Irene* is indebted to the Habesha royal woman who appear prominently in the literature about the Habesha; and how

Johnson's "oriental tales," including *Rasselas*, are energumens through which other voices speak. Throughout, the metaphor of possession allows us to eschew antiquated questions about Johnson's "intentions" or ill-advised attempts to diagnose his texts' "authenticity" and enables us to focus on the power of African discourse to animate the English canon.

"Abyssinia's Samuel Johnson radically revises our understanding of the relationship between English literature and African thought, while unsettling our faith in the agency of England's most monumental author. With remarkable originality and erudition, Belcher challenges received ideas of literary influence and colonial encounter. The English canon will never look the same." - Helen Deutsch, author of *Loving Dr. Johnson*. An intriguing, contemporary take on Samuel Johnson's classic tale of an African prince in search of happiness. A star cast is led by Ashley Zhangazha as Rasselas, Jeff Rawle as Samuel Johnson and Lucian Msamati - the RSC's first black Iago - as the poet Imlac. Singer and actor Cynthia Erivo makes her BBC radio drama debut as Princess Nekayah. Samuel Johnson (18 September 1709 [OS 7 September] – 13 December 1784), often referred to as Dr Johnson, was an English writer who made lasting contributions to English literature as a poet, playwright, essayist, moralist, literary critic, biographer, editor, and lexicographer. Religiously, he was a devout Anglican, and politically a committed Tory. The Oxford Dictionary of National Biography describes Johnson as "arguably the most distinguished man of letters in English history". He is the subject of *Samuel Johnson (1709–1784)*, a poet, essayist, literary critic, editor and lexicographer. He compiled the first dictionary of the English language, published 1755. This extract is from *The History of Rasselas, Prince of Abyssinia*, published in 1759. *Abyssinia's Samuel Johnson: Ethiopian Thought in the Making of an English Author* 1st Edition. by Wendy Laura Belcher (Author). "The most original and provocative book on Samuel Johnson that I have read in a very long time."